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Committees: Budget and Taxation; Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs
Testimony on: SB 791 “Natural Resources – Land Conservation – Establishment of Goals and Programs (Maryland the Beautiful Act)”
Position: Support
Hearing Date: March 9, 2022

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly supports SB 791. This bill sets a goal of protecting 30% of Maryland’s lands by 2030, and 40% by 2040.

The bill has three main components. First, it would establish the Local Land Trust Revolving Loan Program to provide loans to certain land trusts to purchase land for conservation purposes, establish an advisory committee to review and make recommendations on loan applications, and require the Governor to include \$10,000,000 in the fiscal year 2024 budget for the associated fund. Second, the bill would establish the Greenspace Equity Program to fund land trusts to promote community green spaces in urban areas. These spaces in underserved communities could take the form of urban and pocket parks, community woodlands, trails, community gardens, and urban farms. These spaces would enhance public health and livability by improving air quality and providing places to socialize and trails to use for multimodal transportation or exercise. Third, the bill would also increase funding for the Mel Noland Woodland Incentives Fund, which supports preservation of wooded areas on private lands.

American naturalist, E. O. Wilson, who has been called “the father of biodiversity,” calls for widespread conservation of natural lands and waters worldwide. In his book “Half Earth” he explains that to save ourselves, we must preserve the biodiversity of all creatures and to do this, we must protect their habitat. In his book he calls for saving 50% of all lands and waters.¹ This book has started an international movement to conserve 30% of the earth’s land and waters by 2030.

President Biden has taken his message to task and put forth an initiative to preserve 30% of all lands and waters in the United States. This bill goes one step further and puts into place the process and the funding to make this happen in Maryland and then go beyond to a higher goal of 40% land preserved, which is even closer to E. O. Wilson’s recommendation. Importantly, we note, this bill allows land placed in agricultural preservation programs to count towards the percentages of preserved land. While this land will not be developed in the traditional sense, its conservation value is not the same as a natural area that is habitat for endangered species. Even with those differences in mind, this bill would preserve many natural areas of importance and we should act now to save them.

¹ Wilson, E.O. *Half Earth* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016).

The goals set out in this bill not only help preserve biodiversity but also work towards mitigating the impacts of climate change. Leaving a natural area intact, especially a mature forest, will allow that area to continue to sequester carbon, which is vital to mitigating climate change.

SB 791 sets and supports important preservation goals in a timely and practical way to conserve natural areas that are critical to both conservation and climate goals. We strongly urge a favorable report.

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